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RECRUITMENT AND INTERVIEWING SKILLS

--- PHIL LOWE

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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Recruitment and Interviewing Skills

Phil Lowe

A Complete Package For A One-Day Training Workshop

KOGAN PAGE

PUBLISHED IN ASSOCIATION WITH
HARBRIDGE CONSULTING GROUP LIMITED

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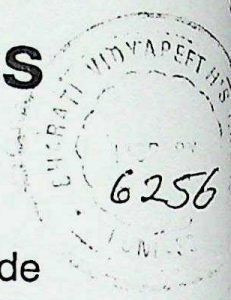
Objectives



The purpose of this one-day programme is to provide you with an overview of, and opportunity to practise, the skills required at each stage of the recruitment process, particularly the interview stage.

At the end of the day you should be able to:

- Create clear job descriptions and employee specifications.
- Decide on the most appropriate criteria for screening applicants.
- Prepare for and conduct a recruitment interview.
- Evaluate data from the interview process.

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1. Introduction

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Exercise: the receiving end

In your group, share your experiences of the recruitment process you went through in being recruited to your company.

- How was the initial communication (offer of interview, etc.) handled?
- What about the interview itself? Did you feel well treated? Poorly treated?
- What kind of impression were you given of the job and the company? Has it turned out to be accurate?
- What happened following the interview?
- As a result of your experiences as a group, can you identify any particular 'dos and don'ts' of recruitment?

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2. Employee and job specifications

Introduction

It should go without saying, but one of the most vital tasks of the recruitment process is making sure that everyone involved in the process, from the boss to whom the eventual job holder will report, to the prospective job-holder him- or herself, is clear about two things:

1. Exactly what duties and responsibilities are covered by the position.

2. The type of person who is likely to be the 'ideal candidate'.

If you are not clear about the precise nature of the position you are recruiting for, or about what kind of person you are looking for, then your chances of finding the best possible match between applicant and job are slim. Recruitment interviewing is, by its very nature, more of an art than a science; the job description and employee specification represent a rare chance to introduce some science into the process!

The essential difference between the two documents is that the job description deals with known facts, while the employee specification represents a 'best guess' about the personal qualities and experience of the successful candidate.

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The job description

In order to clarify this, you must specify the job. Even if you have a job description, does it apply totally to this particular job? Ask WHAT, HOW and WHY?

In essence a job description states the purpose, duties, responsibilities, and relationships of the job and lists the physical, social and economic factors that affect it. Once it has been completed, the information it contains can be used to prepare the employee specification.

The information required for an accurate and comprehensive job description can be collected under the following headings:

Identification of the job

The current title of the job. The department and division in which the job is situated. The number of people employed in doing the job.

Purpose

What is the purpose of the job, and how is the purpose meant to be achieved? State the objectives of the job in clear unambiguous terms and quantify wherever possible. State the duties involved and the method by which they are carried out.

Responsibilities

What responsibilities are there for formulating or recommending policy changes? What responsibilities are there for resources, ie plant and equipment, people, money? Qualify and quantify respectively.

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Relationships

With whom does the occupant liaise and to whom is he/she accountable? Are there other relationships that may influence the achievement of the job's objectives?

Standards of performance

How will the employee know when he or she is meeting the standards expected? What speed, volume, accuracy, frequency etc. is required to achieve the outcome required?

Physical conditions

Where is the work performed? What are the hours of work? Is the work physically active, sedentary, or a mixture of both? Are there any accident or health risks?

Social conditions

To what extent is the occupant a member of a distinct work group and therefore subject to its social pressures and influences? What types of people will he or she meet inside and outside the company in the course of the work, and is he/she required to initiate contacts with them?

Optional information for job descriptions

These may be included as part of the job description, or may be identified as a separate item in an overview of the job.

Any issues which impinge on the job, or are germane to the decision whether to offer or to accept a job, should be clearly identified.

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Economic conditions

State the salary range and increments, commission or bonus schemes, benefits such as pension, sickness payment, company housing, or the provision of a company car.

Prospects for promotion or transfer

What are the prospects for promotion or transfer within the company? Would the occupant be able to secure an improved social position with another organization at a later date?

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Employee specification

The purpose of the employee specification is to create a 'thumbnail sketch' of the kind of person who is likely to be the best candidate for the job as it is described. Rather than spend time trying to compare an applicant with a job description, the employee specification makes the task of selection easier, in that it aims to summarize experience and personal qualities in a way which makes them easy to compare.

Some of the areas it may be helpful to consider when compiling a specification are:

1. *Physique, Health and Appearance:* What are the occupation requirements, if any, in terms of physique and health? Consider here height, build, hearing, eyesight, general health. What are the occupational requirements in terms of appearance? Consider here looks, grooming and voice.

2. *Attainment:* These relate to the knowledge and the skills required to do the job, ie what level of general education is required? (Wherever possible and if appropriate, define in terms of specific examinations.) What specific job training is required?

3. *Experience:* How much experience is essential? At what level? In what market should this have been obtained?

4. *Special Aptitudes:* What special aptitudes does the job demand and to what extent? Consider here mechanical aptitude, manual dexterity, facility in the use of words and figures, artistic or musical ability. If one or more of these aptitudes is required, remember that candidates can only be properly assessed by the use of selection tests.

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5. *Disposition:* How important is it that the job holder should be acceptable to others, and at what levels? What capacity is required for influencing and persuading others? What importance is attached to stability (ie steadiness and dependability) and to self-reliance (ie independent thought and action)?

6. *Interests:* How far are any leisure interests relevant to the demands of the job? Consider here intellectual interests, practical construction interests (eg involving building, repairing, manipulating), physically active pursuits, social interests (such as membership of certain groups) and aesthetic interests (eg music, drama, painting).

7. *Circumstances:* What does the job demand in terms of personal circumstances? Consider here domestic commitments, degree of mobility (eg willingness to work away from the job location), nearness of domicile to the job, readiness to work irregular hours, and the ability to provide finance, or tools and equipment. What personal circumstances would prevent someone from doing the job?

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Exercise: creating a job description

For this exercise, imagine you are recruiting a replacement for you within your organization. The first step is to create a job description for your own job. Before starting, please remember the following points:

1. Concentrate on the job *as it is*. This must be as fair and realistic a protrait of the job as possible. Exclude any aspects of the job which you may expect it to contain in the future.

2. While you would obviously want to attract candidates in a recruitment situation, try to avoid 'selling' the job – concentrating on the more enjoyable aspects at the expense of any less desirable responsibilities. It is important that candidates are aware of all aspects – you want to keep them, not just recruit them!

You may find it helpful to use the areas suggested on pages 7 – 9 (and set out on the next page) to make notes summarizing all the aspects of your job. Make sure your writing is readable as it may be used by another member of the group for the next exercise.

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Identification of the job:

Purpose:

Responsibilities:

Relationships:

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Standards of performance:

Physical conditions:

Social conditions:

Economic conditions:

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Prospects of promotion or transfer:

Any other relevant information:

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Exercise: creating an employee specification

You have received from one of the other groups a selection of job descriptions. You are to select one of these and produce an employee specification for the chosen job.

Remember that while the employee specification is primarily for the benefit of the interviewer, it must be presented in a format that can be shown to a prospective candidate, in order to give him or her a flavour of what is being sought. You should therefore ensure that the specification does not contain any value judgements or company-specific jargon.

Use the areas suggested on pages 10-11 (and itemised on the next page) to produce your specification, and be prepared to present your finished product to the other groups.

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Physique, health and appearance:

Attainments:

Experience:

Special aptitudes:

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Disposition:

Interests:

Circumstances:

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3. Initial selection

Exercise: selecting a candidate

Please refer to your pre-workshop reading, which comprised a job description and employee specification for an office manager position.

You will be presented with four curriculum vitaes from applicants for this position. As a group, you are asked to select two of these applicants for interview.

You may use whatever criteria you like, but be prepared to discuss the process you followed at the end of the exercise. Remember that the primary objective is to select the two 'best fit' candidates in terms of the employee specification.

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Selecting a shortl

Once the job and desired candidate have been specified, you need to co the most appropriate route for generating a shortlist of candidates.

Advert or agency?

How do you want to publicize the vacancy? If you want to advertise the va you will need to consider:

- *Cost:* How big an advertising space can you afford? How can you be the space? Remember that a small ad will only attract candidates religiously read every advertisement, while a large display advert will a 'browsers' as well. In other words, do you want to attract only peopl are job-hunting anyway, or do you want to tempt people away from existing jobs?

- *Publication:* What kind of person do you want to attract? Which news of magazine are they likely to read? Certain newspapers specia certain kinds of job (for example, *The Guardian* advertises media jobs Monday), while specialists in particular areas may be best reached th specialist magazines.

- *Your own workload*: You, or somebody in your team, may need through as many as several hundred applications to reach your fina

If you are thinking of using an agency, you will need to consider:

- *Cost:* Most agencies will charge a percentage of the final sala commission. If you are happy paying this amount of money, make sure provide a contractual clause whereby you can reclaim some or all o commission if the applicant proves unsuitable within a relatively short s of time.

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- *Your own workload*: An agency will take care of the initial screening for you, and send you only those candidates they consider meet your specification. This means you will only have to make time for interviews.

- *The agency's network*: How will the agency generate a list of candidates? Will they advertise, and if so, where? Will they only produce candidates who are already on their books, and if so will these really be suitable?

Application form or cv?

If your job description or employee specification are particularly rigid, you may find it useful to produce an application form for the post on which you can specifically itemize the relevant information you require. Otherwise, be sure in your advertising or agency brief to specify whether you require a letter of application to accompany the cv or whether a cv alone is sufficient. Also make sure that the advertised details mention any **essential** qualities or skills the candidate must possess – this will save a lot of screening time.

How many interview stages do you want?

Who in the organization needs to meet the candidates face-to-face? In most cases, being interviewed by more than two people at once is a daunting experience. It may be better to build in two interview stages, with a small number of candidates being invited back a second time to meet the more senior or time-pressed member(s) of staff.

How urgent is the appointment?

This will obviously affect the method you use. Often an agency route is quicker if you choose an agency which already has people on their books who match your specification. For some appointments an advert in an evening paper with a telephone number to ring will at least yield an immediate response, if not necessarily from ideal candidates.

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Temporary or permanent?

For positions which are likely to be difficult to fill, it may be worth considering making a temporary appointment in the first instance. This sidesteps any contractual obligations to a candidate who proves to be unsuitable, and means that the person who is eventually appointed permanently is more likely to stay, since both they and you have had ample opportunity to iron out any problems.

Aptitude and ability

Does the candidates' intelligence or ability in any particular areas (such as maths or English) need to be tested? Some tests can be bought 'off the shelf' and scored by the interviewer; others may need to be administered by an outside professional. Make sure the candidate is aware that he or she will be tested.

Personality assessment

If you feel the position requires certain specific personality traits as distinct from abilities (tough-mindedness, for example, or, a structured approach to work) then it may be worth considering using an appropriate psychometric test. Certain considerations must be borne in mind:

- Make sure from the publishers that the test is *reliable* (i.e. its results are consistent for everybody tested) and *valid* (i.e. it measures what it is supposed to measure). Reputable test publishers will have conducted extensive validation studies on their tests, but don't necessarily be convinced by a skilled marketing department; get the opinion of someone with experience of testing.

- Most good personality tests must be administered by a qualified practitioner: the test publisher will advise you on this point. This adds to the cost of the exercise, but it will almost certainly increase the likelihood of the successful candidate being right for the post.

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- It is usually best to ask only candidates who have been called for interview to complete the chosen test, and then to use the results as confirmation of your own selection, rather than as a substitute. The test is designed to produce additional information to that gained from the interview – it should never be used as a substitute.

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4. Preparation and planning

Exercise: preparing for the interview

You have now selected two prospective candidates to invite to an interview for the position of office manager.

It is unlikely that their cvs represent an exact match with your employee specification, and so you will therefore need to discuss as a group which areas you would want to concentrate on in the interview. Look particularly for anything in their cvs which might make them ideal for the job (in order that you can check they really are) or which might make them highly unsuitable (in order that you can give them a right of reply).

You will not be required formally to present your conclusions, but they will be used as the basis of a group discussion.

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Reviewing the information

Read the application form or cv with the employee specification in mind. If the candidate is definitely outside the spec, then reject him or her. If you feel it is worthwhile to see them, make notes about points you wish to probe on the employee spec.

Read the cv or form imaginatively: what does it tell you? Look for:

1. Patterns (positive and negative) and breaks in patterns: rising levels of responsibility; lengths of stay in job; reasons for leaving, etc.
2. Decision making: scope, levels and independence.
3. Examples of teamwork, leadership or teambuilding.
4. Notable successes (or failures); special projects undertaken.
5. Anything skimmed over, or even omitted.
6. Generalizations to investigate.
7. Parallels and strengths relative to the vacant role: skills, experience, type of company, industry, responsibilities.
8. Gaps or weaknesses vs. job description or employee specification.

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Also consider what you should investigate apart from what is in the application documents:

1. What is the candidate **really** looking for?

2. What is the candidate like as a person?

3. What attributes does the candidate feel are important to bring to the job?

4. What is his or her preferred work style? Can he or she cope with the pressures, difficulties etc. that this particular job will entail?

5. How will the candidate improve the contribution of the role to the department or company?

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Structuring the interview

In any interview the task is to allocate the time between the opening, the middle and the ending into distinct proportions. Each section has a different logic about it, and if any section is not handled well the whole interview will fall down. In an interview of an hour, 5-10 minutes would be usual for the opening, ditto the ending, leaving 40 odd minutes for the 'meat'. In structuring interviews, time for dealing with the 'people' aspects of the interview as well as the task must be allowed.

Opening

- Is the interviewee's level of knowledge and experience taken into account?
- Is the approach right for him or her?
- Is the structure of the interview clear to the interviewee? Does he or she know exactly what is expected of him/her? Has this been communicated by you effectively?
- Has he or she got an outline of the areas to be covered?

Information gathering and giving

- Has the interview been well planned with key areas and points noted? Has the planning of the key areas been sequential or interlinked? (The inter-linked type of structure will allow for more flexibility in the interview.)

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- Is all material relevant to the interview?
- How is information to be recorded?

Ending

- Has the interview achieved its objectives? Have the decisions reached been recorded?
- Were main points communicated, has the interviewee understood what is to happen next?
- What are the follow up points?

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Process skills

Conversational skills

These skills are used at the beginning of an interview before moving on to the specific purposes of the interview. Interviews can be stressful for all concerned; nervousness is common; both parties usually need to accomplish certain ends. By taking time to create an appropriate atmosphere the interviewer can get rid of some of these barriers.

The objectives of using these skills are:

- to put the interviewee at his or her ease, to get the interviewee relaxed and talking
- to get the interviewee involved and build rapport
- to establish the interviewer's credibility.

Factors and Options

The main factors contributing to the above are:

- setting the scene
- opening remarks
- non-verbal language.

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Setting the scene

The furniture layout will help to create the appropriate atmosphere. Armchairs around a coffee table can be used for very informal interviews; a face-to-face meeting across a desk is for the most formal. The desk should be fairly clear; too much clutter can give the impression of insufficient preparation.

Timing! Obviously this is part of control but keeping people waiting will obviously increase the pressures they feel. Hurrying along in the interview or dawdling may also create an unprofessional impression.

The common civilities may get forgotten under pressure. Again they help relax the interviewee (and the interviewer) and restore a sense of social ease: hand-shakes, smiles, leaving clear instructions at reception (preferably meeting people before they enter the interview area), refreshments, pointing out the toilets. Think back to the interviews you have had as an interviewee. Demonstrated interest and concern on the part of the interviewer and respect for the interviewee help to relax everyone more quickly.

Also, of course, this gives the interviewee their impression of your overall approach and attitude to people. It should be positive!

Opening remarks

This will depend on the personal style of the interviewer, of course. Using the interviewee's expertise and knowledge about sport, travel or common areas of interest will help. Start with easy questions. Explain the purpose of the interview or give information about the job, department or company. Allow time for conversation to develop. Do not over-indulge – once the interviewee is relaxed and talking the interview proper can start.

Non-verbal behaviour

Everyone is an expert in body language. Just listen to the signals your own body gives you – your own posture when you are bored, excited etc. Remembering that non-verbal language is probably about three or four times more powerful than the

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spoken word, match your body language to the message. If this is not done the interviewee will pick up two or more conflicting messages and will be confused and unsure about the outcome of the interview.

Controlling skills

Objective setting and achievement

Objectives must be clear before the interview. (They may of course be changed in the light of further information given in the interview.) They must be:

a. specific and concrete

b. flexible

c. capable of being achieved.

If they are not realistic and cannot be achieved in the time available then important areas may be missed in the interview through haste.

Once the objectives are clear, key question areas can be framed, not in the sense of a script, but as a checklist for areas that must be covered. Suitable opening questions can be framed.

The appropriate strategy, eg informal or formal approach, is the next decision.

During the course of the interview the process skills given later, especially the *listening and questioning skills*, should give the interviewer control. Non-verbal controls are equally as important. It may be worthwhile sometimes to let the interviewee stray off the subject or appear to be in control. This can give the interviewer vital clues about the interviewee's style and approaches to these areas. A strict non-deviational interview can seem like an interrogation!

Probing techniques, if used tactfully, can also give the interviewer control. (Not if used to extremes: try asking someone "why do you say that?" three or four times, and watch anxiety mount.) The art of good interviewing is effective listening and watching and guiding people back into the appropriate area of play, rather than being a referee with a constant whistle going. Interviewees may need coaxing to be open and honest, rather than direct confrontation.

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Non-talkative interviewees

How do you get interviewees to open up and tell you things? You can't if they don't want to! All you can do is try to put the person at ease, ask open questions and allow rapport to develop. However, although these will help, there is no ultimate guarantee that they will work! Pressure tactics usually end up being counter productive.

Talkative interviewees

The simplest way is to ask them to stop, but unless there is a high rapport between interviewer and interviewee, this usually shuts the interviewee up totally. However it can be achieved in other ways:

- Use closed, short, specific questions.
- Summarize and acknowledge briefly then move on.
- Use body language, breaking eye contact: or an upraised palm. In the latter case, equivalent to telling the interviewee to shut up – add something like "let me just get this straight".
- Taking notes and slowing down the interview.
- Formality and a more rigid structure will reduce flow.

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Lack of honesty

Often dishonesty will come out in contrasts between verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Unless someone is deliberately setting out to mislead, mistakes and errors should be treated as such and the interviewee allowed to correct without being made to feel in the wrong, with support from the interviewer.

In more deliberate cases probing questions can be used and the interviewee given a chance to explain him or herself. Such areas should be followed up and the reasons for the lie explained.

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Administration of the interview

The following arrangements must be made within the company if the interviews are to be properly conducted and the candidates given a favourable impression.

1. The provisional dates for the interviews should have been booked before the job advertisement appeared. These dates must now be checked and confirmed.

2. If two or more interviews with the candidate are to be conducted in sequence decide on the specific order and agree the areas of common ground and areas to be covered by each interviewer.

3. Where will the interviews be held? In the office of the interviewer? In a special room within the company? (Remember to book it.) In a local hotel? (Remember to book a room and to inform the hotel manager of any special requirements.)

4. Agree the date, time, duration, and order of interviews with each candidate. Arrange for those who have the shortest distance to travel to be interviewed first. Ensure that the time fits in with the times of local transport if there is an infrequent service. Provide sufficient time for the interviewer to complete his notes after each interview.

5. If more than one interviewer is going to meet the candidates, circulate well ahead a note confirming the agreed interviewing time, copies of agreed briefs, and copies of the candidates' application forms. (Remember to treat the forms confidentially.)

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6. Send the receptionist a list of the candidates' names, their interview times, and the names of interviewers.

7. Arrange for tea, coffee or a meal as appropriate.

8. Arrange for the payment of expenses.

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5. Effective questioning

Exercise: how not to ...

In your group, develop a list of 10 questions which you would advise an interviewer *not to ask* the candidate for the office manager position.

Try to concentrate on questions which you think a bad interviewer might ask with the best intentions but which would be unproductive in terms of getting information, putting the candidate at ease, or any of the other functions of an interview we have discussed today. Be clear about *why* your chosen questions are inadvisable to ask.

Be prepared to share your list with the other groups.

Exercise: go ahead, make me talk

For this exercise you will work in pairs. Decide who is A and who is B.

Person A will play the interviewer role. Your task is to ask B a series of questions about his or her working life and background. The aim of the exercise is to ensure that none of the questions you ask can be answered with a simple yes or no. As soon as B is able to answer yes or no to a question, your turn is over and you must swap roles (so B asks the questions.)

Try to keep a mental note of the kind of questions which are most successful at getting a more elaborate response from your partner.

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Effective questioning

Conducting an effective recruitment interview requires the use of some basic skills. The good interviewer controls the discussion by asking the right questions and listening to the answers. Listening means 'active' listening – really concentrating on the replies being given without evaluating their content. Questioning means asking the right questions; in a proper manner, in the correct sequence. The types of question you can ask are summarised below.

The open question

One of the most useful in any interview, 'Tell me about ...'. Your interviewee can offer what he/she thinks is most important – his/her choice may be significant. However, avoid too general a question: 'Tell me about yourself' can be difficult to answer.

The closed question

Requires a short specific answer, eg 'Do you like clerical work?', 'You had trouble with the computer didn't you?' These questions can be used to probe for specific information or to control an over-talkative person. But used too often, they make an interview sound like an interrogation.

Leading question

Implies the correct answer and hence informs the person but does not encourage him/her to inform you. Therefore questions like: 'Do you have the necessary experience', 'Are you good at ...', 'Can you ...' need to be rephrased. However, if you use an approach such as 'What would you do to overcome this problem?' this leads the person to discuss specific approaches they might take to a job.

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Multiple questions

'How long have you been in this job; what have been your major objectives over the year and in each case what were your main achievements?' Such questions tend to be confusing and confining. You don't give the person a chance to answer before asking another question. Usually, they should be avoided.

Implied values question

'Surely you don't agree with ...', or 'Oh?' (in a disapproving tone). Your task is not to influence or express disapproval but to obtain valid information. Try not to use them.

Comparison question

'How did job X compare with job Y?' People find this easier to answer than direct questions about their likes and dislikes. It is a useful question for exploring attitudes.

The objective question

'What proportion of your time do you spend doing ...?' may be more informative than 'How strong is your interest in ...?' It requires a specific and measurable answer.

Follow-up or probe question

Use when you don't have enough information or to discourage vague answers. 'Tell me more about ...' or 'Can we go into this a little deeper?' Such questions need to be phrased so as not to appear aggressive.

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Non-committal responses

'Uh huh', 'Yes', 'How interesting' or just an interested expression and silence can be used to elicit more information or to show you are still listening.

Reflecting or summarizing question

These questions are used to summarize and check that you have correctly interpreted and understood.

Link or bridging question

'Thank you, I was interested in ... can we now move on to talk about ... ?' This is a polite way of moving the interviewee on to the next area without seeming abrupt.

Final question

'Is there anything we have not covered that you would like to ask about?' Such a question can lead to important additional information.

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Examples of useful questions

How did you get interested in...?

Have you ever turned a job down? If so, why?

What do you think about...?

What do you think we should be looking for in this job?

Do you work best/prefer to work in a team or as an individual? Why?

Who was your most difficult boss? Why?

What sort of deadlines have you had to work to?

What is the dullest part of your present job?

What do you think this job will be about?

How do you feel about working for a woman? Someone younger?

Describe yourself in three words

Why did you...?

Have you ever had to make a decision alone? What, etc.?

One area I don't understand is...

I'm a little worried about... – can you put my mind at rest?

What do you hope/want to get out of this job?

What sorts of problems do you come across?

What is the most difficult situation?

What irritates you in other people?

What skills do you think you will need here?

How would your partner describe you?

Do you have any ideas about how you'd like your career to develop?

What things make you laugh?

What sort of people do you admire? For example?

Where do you think this job might take you?

Where do you think this job might be difficult?

Can you describe the ideal boss? What do you expect of him/her?

What jobs do you not like doing?

What would your boss say about you if I rang him/her up?

When did you last lose your temper?

What types of pressure have you worked under?

What sort of responsibilities has that fitted you for?

What contact do you have with your superior(s)?

What sorts of decisions do you make?

What takes up most of your time?

What are your long-term ambitions?

Is there anything you are not clear on?

Is there anything else you would like to tell us – anything we've missed?

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Listening skills

Use listening skills:

- To understand as fully as possible the interviewee's thoughts and feelings about the subject matter of the interview.
- To make certain that the interviewee has understood your thoughts and feelings.

Barriers to effective listening

Some of the barriers to effective listening are fairly obvious, like fatigue, a stuffy room, an uncomfortable seat (or too comfortable in some cases!), extraneous noise and other distractions. But the speaker's task of getting through to his or her listener may also be obstructed by barriers in the listener's mind, such as:

- Indifference.
- Prejudice.
- Pre-occupation.
- Reaction to words with an emotional connotation.
- Faking attention.
- Criticizing delivery and physical appearance.
- Premature dismissal of a subject as uninteresting or too difficult.
- Listening without looking.
- Yielding easily to distraction.

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The skills of listening

Good habits to concentrate on include the following:

ATTENDING SKILLS	Looking involved Appropriate body movement Eye contact Non-distracting environment
FOLLOWING SKILLS	Invitations to talk Some encouragement Skilled questioning Attentive silence
REFLECTING SKILLS	Paraphrasing Reflecting feelings Reflecting meaning Summarizing

Good listening habits

Keep an open mind

When the speaker says something with which the listener strongly disagrees, the listener continues to listen attentively and searches his or her own mind for evidence that might support the speakers point of view.

Summarize what has been said

Whether or not the speaker summarizes what he or she has said, the good listener notes down the main points the speaker makes and reviews them whenever they have an opportunity. In this way they not only increase their chances of remembering what has been said, they also have a sound basis for subsequent discussion.

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Listen 'between the lines'

The good listener not only listens to what is being said but also tries to penetrate behind the words to the speaker's thoughts and state of mind. Why a speaker says something is often more important than what he or she says. Listening 'between the lines' can be done successfully only if the listener is able to control their emotions, suspend their judgement and search for the truth with a truly open mind.

Effective listening is not easy. It is not sufficient just to sit back, relax and let the words flow over us. A continuous, determined effort is required to comprehend what the speaker is saying; to sift his or her words critically but without prejudice and to store some of the points for future use.

Although most people find it difficult to start with, effective listening becomes easier with practice and brings its own rewards, in particular a deepening understanding of other people, their problems and their points of view.

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Exercise: interview role-plays

In this exercise you will have the opportunity to apply some of the skills we have discussed. You will work in threes: decide between yourselves who is A, B and C.

In your threesome, you will undertake three separate interviews, taking the roles of interviewer, interviewee and observer:

Round one: A interviews B, C observes
Round two: B interviews C, A observes
Round three: C interviews A, B observes

Each round will last 15 minutes, at the end of which five minutes is allowed for the observer to give feedback to the interviewer.

When you are the interviewer:

You have only 15 minutes to conduct as full an interview as you can for the office manager position. You may concentrate on whatever aspects you like, but remember:

- You must put the interviewee at his/her ease, and open the interview effectively.
- Assume you know nothing about the interviewee's background; question him/her appropriately.
- It is up to you to find the 'real person' behind the interviewee.
- It is your responsibility to have closed the interview before the 15-minute deadline.

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When you are the interviewee:

- Assume that you really want the office manager position, and sell yourself accordingly.
- If you want to lie to the interviewer, that is up to you; if he/she discovers you are lying your prospects may be affected: again, treat the interview as one for a job you really want.
- Remember the time deadline: you will want to have given a good account of yourself as an interviewee within the 15 minutes.
- Keep a mental note of how the interviewer makes you feel, especially in terms of opening and closing the interview.

When you are the observer:

Your job is to observe the interviewer, not the interviewee, and to ensure the interview does not overrun. Concentrate on:

- How well did she/he open the interview?
- Did he/she question effectively and listen actively?
- Did she/he finish the interview within the 15-minute deadline?

Use the checklist overleaf to record your comments.

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Observer's checklist

Opening:

Was the interviewee welcomed?

Was the structure of the interview outlined?

Comments: _____

_____

Information gathering and giving:

Was the interviewer responsive to the interviewee in terms of pace and approach?

Did he/she question effectively?

Did he/she listen actively?

Was he/she in control?

Comments: _____

_____

Endings:

Did the interviewer close within the 15 minutes?

Was the interviewee told what would happen next?

Was it clear that the interview was over?

Comments: _____

_____

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6. Evaluation and follow up

At the end of a recruitment process, you will be left with several sheets of badly written notes and a hazy recollection of what each candidate looked like (with perhaps a vivid picture of the bright purple scarf one of them wore).

Once again, the task of the final stage is to strike the right balance between art and science in making the final evaluation. The following guidelines should be borne in mind:

Decide in advance the *evaluation criteria* you are going to use. For example, will you rate each candidate on the area covered in the employee specification? If so, will you do this during the interview or after it?

How are you going to use the candidates' *test results*, if taken? Again, it is probably best to settle in advance what standard they are expected to attain (if an aptitude or ability test) or what kind of personality profile you are seeking (if a personality test). If you are using an outside professional to administer the test, a thorough briefing beforehand and a thorough debriefing afterwards will yield valuable information additional to the test results themselves.

If there is *more than one interviewer*, how will you settle any (inevitable) disagreements as to the suitability of each candidate? If you are in agreement about the criteria you are using, giving each candidate a numerical score for each criterion and then comparing total scores may provide a more 'scientific' way of comparing not only between candidates, but between interviewer's impressions of each candidate. Often individual interviewers will be swayed by irrelevancies (a particular sense of humour in the candidate, or even hair colour) but will broadly agree on suitability for certain aspects of the job.

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Using some kind of numerical or verbal rating for candidates against key criteria can provide much needed clarity. In the case of the office manager position we have been using in this workshop, the employee specification criteria could be used either for giving a numerical score for each category, or as the basis of an evaluation form like that shown on pages 52-53. On the other hand, the interviewer might feel that some of the criteria are better assessed 'subjectively' and instead look for the numerical ratings in broad areas such as relevant experience, relevant skills and personal fit. If all three areas were felt to be equally important, candidates' total scores could be compared to help the process of sorting the 'best fit'.

Once the decision has been made

It is tempting to avoid letting unsuccessful candidates know until your chosen person has accepted the position, 'just in case'. If a candidate was not suitable at the interview, they are not suddenly going to become suitable just because you have lost your ideal candidate. If there are genuinely two people who can do the job, then keep one in reserve. Otherwise, do not make people suffer unnecessarily by waiting to give them bad news.

When you contact the successful candidate, ensure you give them all the information they need to make an informed decision on whether to accept to job. If there was a question mark over the precise salary on offer, check the figure and tell them. Resist the temptation to make vague unsubstantiated promises ("It's a bit less than we said, but it's almost certain to go up 10% in January"). It may save you readvertising in the short term, but it will cost you a lot more in the long term.

Once the candidate has accepted the position, make clear to them that the appointment is subject to satisfactory references being obtained, and obtain them as soon as possible. Let the successful candidate have a copy of his/her contract or conditions of employment earlier rather than later, again so that they can be sure what they're letting themselves in for.

Once a start date has been agreed, ensure that everything will be in place for the day the new person arrives (does the accounts department know to pay his or her salary? Does he or she have a desk to sit at?).

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Finally, make sure that every unsuccessful applicant from each stage of the process has been informed of the result of their application. You are under no legal obligation to do this, but it is common courtesy and it will make them more kindly disposed to your organization — they may, after all, be a potential customer. Don't feel obliged in rejection letters to talk about the high standard of applications or what a difficult choice it was. This is flannel and the applicant knows it. Like a policeman reporting a death to a relative, your best bet is to come straight to the point: "I am sorry to tell you that your application was unsuccessful," is probably all you need to say.

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Sample evaluation form

POSITION: _____

CANDIDATE: _____

Comments
Not acceptable/acceptable/super

Physical makeup
- Appearance
- Presence
- Voice and speech

Attainments
- Education
- Qualifications
- Over/under qualified
- Personal achievements

Experience
- Subject areas
- Status
- Decision-making level
- responsibility level
- Initiative shown

Special attributes
- Alert
- Questioning
- Intelligent responses
- Analytical ability

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Disposition

Initial impression

Self-confidence

Works better individually or in a team?

Needs supervision?

Interests

Any conflicting

Team vs. individual

Practical/social/academic

Circumstances

Mobility

Commitments elsewhere

After the interview you should know: Can they do the job? Would they be reliable? Are they keen? Would they be good future material?

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Exercise: interview assessment

For this final exercise, you are going to evaluate the person you interviewed in th role-play.

You may not have been able to glean all the information required to evaluate you candidate against the full employee specification. Instead, decide on four criteri for which you felt you had enough information to make a decision as to suitabilit and score the candidate out of ten for each.

Criteria:	Score
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
Total	

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Further reading

Crabtree, S *The Recruitment Workbook* Kogan Page 1991
Corfield, R *Successul Interview Skills* Kogan Page 1992

About the author

Phil Lowe is a consultant with Harbridge Consulting Group Ltd, specializing in communication and interpersonal skills, personal effectiveness and personality assessment. A trained actor, he spent several years working in secondary and further education as a drama specialist, using theatre and creative techniques in issue-based and skills development workshops. Prior to joining Harbridge House he worked at managerial level in the publishing industry. His writing work includes the BBC Radio 4 business quiz *The Board Game*, and two books for Kogan Page *Individual Excellence: Improving Personal Effectiveness at Work*, and *Management Development Beyond the Fringe.* He holds an honours degree in English from Cambridge University and a postgraduate diploma from The Drama Studio, London.

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Harbridge Consulting Group Ltd is the European subsidiary of Harbridge House Inc., founded in the US over 40 years ago by members of the faculty of the Harvard Business School. The firm is now part of the Coopers & Lybrand international network, and is actively involved in management development training and consultancy throughout America and Europe. Harbridge House's unique blend of consultancy and training is supported by extensive research facilities, strengthening the firm's commitment to the advancement of management development techniques.

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